



Parashat Toledot concludes with Yitzchak sending his son Yaakov to Padan Aram where he is to marry and build a family. As he bids Yaakov farewell Yitzchak confers upon him the "blessing of Avraham," declaring, "He shall grant you the blessing of Avraham – for you and your offspring after you..." (28:4).

Maimonides cites this verse in the Hilkhot Melakhim section of his *Mishneh Torah* (10:7), in the context of the obligation of *berit mila* (circumcision):

Circumcision was commanded to only Avraham and his offspring, as it says [in reference to circumcision] "you and your offspring after you" (Bereishit 17:9) – to the exclusion of Yishmael, as it says, "for [only] Yitzchak shall be considered your offspring" (Bereishit 21:12). And Esav is [likewise] excluded, for Yitzchak said to Yaakov, "He shall grant you the blessing of Avraham – for you and your offspring." This indicates that only he is Avraham's offspring who follows his faith and proper path [of living].

According to Maimonides, it is here where Yaakov is formally named the exclusive heir to God's covenant with Avraham. Just as God had declared to Avraham that only Yitzchak would be considered his "offspring" with respect to the covenant, so does Yitzchak now establish that only Yaakov – and not his brother Esav – is included in that covenant. This verse thus serves as the source for the exclusion of Esav and his descendants from the obligation of *berit mila*, the sign of the covenant between the Almighty and Avraham's offspring.

As many later commentators have noted, Maimonides here deviates somewhat from the Talmud's discussion of this issue. In Masekhet Sanhedrin (59b), the Gemara infers Esav's exclusion from circumcision from a different source – the aforementioned verse in which God declares, "for [only] Yitzchak shall be considered your offspring" ("*ki be-Yitzchak yikarei lekha zara*"). As the Gemara notes, this phrase literally means "for [only] from among Yitzchak shall be considered your offspring," suggesting that only some of Yitzchak's progeny will earn this status. The Gemara thus deduces that God alludes to the fact that only Yaakov, to the exclusion of Esav, will inherit the covenant with Avraham. Rabbi Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk, among others, explained that Maimonides cited a different source for this rule because the verse cited by the Gemara does not explicitly exclude Esav from the covenant. In that verse, God merely establishes that not all of Yitzchak's offspring will inherit this blessing; He does not specify which of Yitzchak's sons will be excluded. Maimonides therefore cites the verse from Parashat Toledot, in which Yitzchak explicitly names Yaakov exclusive heir to the covenant, as the source for Esav's exclusion from *berit mila*.

As cited earlier, Maimonides concludes this discussion by commenting, "This indicates that only he is Avraham's offspring *who follows his faith and proper path*." The

question arises, why was it necessary for Maimonides to add this remark concerning Yaakov's adherence to the faith and values of Avraham? How does this affect the status of Yaakov and Esav with respect to the covenant?

Evidently (as noted by Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Sorotzkin, in his *Rinat Yitzchak*, Parashat Vayishlach), Yitzchak's designation of Yaakov as heir to the covenant was dependent upon Yaakov's continued adherence to the beliefs and values of that covenant. Indeed, even after the famous revelation to Yaakov in Bet-El, in which God promised to protect Yaakov and give the land to his offspring, Yaakov still prayed that God should fulfill those promises (28:20). As Nachmanides explains, Yaakov understood that he could potentially forfeit these promises through misconduct, and therefore entertained some doubt even after this prophetic revelation. Thus, Yaakov's rights to the covenant were not guaranteed; they were contingent upon his loyalty and devotion to his grandfather's teachings and beliefs.

Maimonides therefore emphasizes that Yitzchak conferred upon Yaakov the blessing of Avraham and designated him as the offspring "who follows his faith and proper path." This conferral was made on condition that Yaakov would indeed commit himself to the spiritual legacy of Avraham, and thereby be deserving of the privilege and responsibility of bearing this legacy and building a nation that would do the same.